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THE BOOK OF JOB IN OTHER LITERATURES. I.

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In that library of writings which has so wonderfully affected the life and thought of human beings in the course of centuries since their appearance, not the least profound and far-reaching in its influence is the Book of Job. Its form and mode of expression would apparently limit its range to the thoughtful among the sons of men. The difficulties which attend its interpretation and translation would seem to shut it off from the comprehension of the multitude; and yet, it has often been observed that thoughtful men among the common people, have enjoyed its lofty teaching and its sublime imagery. In a peculiar sense may it appropriate to itself that title which crowns the whole collection of which it forms a part, and be called the "Book of Books;" for it has been the inspiration of deeply serious and wise thinkers, whose writings have in their turn moulded the thoughts and action of the multitude and are the pride of nations. The Book of Job is the "stuff" out of which has been woven many a strong fabric of devout reasoning. It is a mine of precious ore; and many are they who have appropriated its treasures of figure and epithet, so that now its expressions adorn with something of their original splendor the prose and poetical works of many literatures. What an epoch in the religious thought of Israel must its appearance have marked. Who would not wish to know more of the age and circumstances in which it came to light as well as its reception by the men of its time? And yet, the impression then made could have been only a slight ripple on the ocean of human thinking in comparison with the impulse it has given to minds in other ages. "His colloquies," says Cheyne of the author, "are the fountain-head from which the great river of philosophic poetry took its origin." Those Hebrew writings—how wonderfully, how wisely free from marks of time! How they

rise above all attempts to bind them down to local and temporal conditions,—worthy media of that eternal Spirit whose teaching they transmit to all generations!

The problem which lies at the basis of the book is one which stamps it with a universal character. The truth is, that this problem, when stated in its broadest way, is the problem of human life everywhere. How to explain the inequalities, the frustrations, the aberrations of human existence—how to reconcile the present state of things with the government of a righteous (not to say, loving), God,—all earnest men have had to face one phase or another of this world-puzzle and work out as best they might a solution whereby they could hope to exist, if not to be satisfied with existence. To be a man is to enter in a greater or less degree into the experience of Job. It will be interesting, therefore, and not unprofitable to inquire into the relations of this book to similar writings in other literatures; and we may expect that the literatures of many people will be concerned with these and related questions. Yet such a survey as this inquiry implies is too broad for a limited discussion such as is here possible and the subject must be confined to a few among those writings whose authors may be supposed to have had some acquaintance with this book or whose thought ran along the same lines. Remarkable parallels are found where any supposition of literary dependence is out of the question.

The subject may be introduced by a glance at those figurative elements which the book shares with other ancient writings. We approach here an inquiry which deserves careful discrimination. The mythical allusions found in the pages of the Sacred Writings are but just beginning to be recognized and investigated by thoughtful scholars. The mere existence of such allusions has been denied by some, for fear that an acknowledgement of it might throw discredit upon the character of the Bible. But we are coming to see that the differentiating characteristic of the biblical writers is not found in the forms of expression, the use of parallelism, the adoption of the methods of common or literary speech, the employment of the metaphor, or the proverb which was in everyone's mouth; but the purpose which underlay all

this and the spiritual result which the finished work revealed. Certainly no one who views with fearless and unprejudiced mind the language of the Book of Job can fail to observe the mythic forms of speech which are employed in it in larger measure, perhaps, than in any other biblical writings. Perhaps the most manifest example of this is the reference to the dragon. In Job 3: 8 the patriarch, pouring forth the long restrained flood of his emotion in heaped-up bitterness of reproach upon the day when he first saw the light, cries out

"Let them curse it that curse the day
Who are ready to rouse up leviathan."

The picture here is that of professed enchanters or magicians who were believed to have power, by casting magic spells, to rouse up a sky dragon to consume the light and bring eclipse upon the day. Similar references are found in 7: 12, "sea-monster" (*tannin*) a dragon in the sea who must be watched lest he break loose and destroy. In 26: 12-13 we find the two beasts united;

"By his power he quelleth the sea,
And by his skill he smiteth through Rahab;
By his breath the heavens become serene,
His hand pierceth the flying serpent."

Similar and more obscure references to this creature are found also in 7: 9, 12, and in Isaiah 27: 2; perhaps there is also a hint at it in the later description of "leviathan."

Is this something of Job's own creation, a poetical fancy which he originates in order to heighten the force of his poetry? By no means. The same conceptions are found away back in the earlier stages of human life. Among the so-called Accadians the first faint trace of it may be seen in a belief that the deep was a flowing stream encircling the earth like a snake, binding earth and heaven together,—a conception which recalls the Oceanus of Homer and the Midgard snake of Teutonic mythology. Semitic people seem to have looked above and, seeking to account for the phases of the moon and lunar eclipses, have pictured in the sky a battle in which some monstrous beast vanquishes the heavenly bodies. The same belief appears in Hindoo mythology and lingers to-day among the Chinese and natives of Algiers. It is the

dragon of the heavens which produces the eclipse of the sun by winding itself about that luminary, and God must be continually wounding it and thus weaken its strength if the sun is to be set free again. These two imaginative conceptions gradually coalesce, as is evident in Job and Isaiah, where the cloud-consuming eclipse-bringing monster of the sky and his brother of the deep are yoked together to heighten the brilliant representation.

The view of Sheol which this book contains is one of tremendous force. The well nigh frantic sufferer looks down with shuddering horror upon the bars and gates of that subterranean prison-house and the darkness oppresses him with its deadly blackness, where beneath the waters the shades tremble under the piercing gaze of their terrible king. Surely this picture of a shadowy city in this land of darkness, whose entrance was guarded by destroying angels and whose location was beneath the waters under the earth, is not original with this writer who employs the mythical beliefs of the Babylonians and other ancient nations with wonderful effect.

Other figurative phrases in which, with more or less probability, may be traced similar allusions to mythological fancies are scattered through the book. The picture of God as a mighty hunter—whose poisoned arrows are aimed at Job, whose net has encompassed him, or, as one who touching him brings upon him leprosy,—recalls the Greek Apollo, the archer, with his shafts of destruction and pestilence. The allusion to Orion, the foolish giant, to the mountain of gold in the far north, phrases such as “the eyelids of the dawn” and the gorgeous figure of the dawn uncovering the earth and restoring its color, have real though obscure parallels in ancient eastern mythology.

One remark may be made in regard to these mythic phrases and allusions. Nowhere is the use of them such as to detract from the lofty spiritual teaching. It is like Milton’s employment of the imagery of Greek and Roman mythology in “Paradise Lost.” In one respect, however, the parallel does not hold. In the case of the Book of Job these beliefs about nature and God embodied in these mythical phrases were more or less near and living in the religion of other nations—

a fact which heightens the force with which they must have come to the first readers of the book. They clothed it with life and helped to impress more strongly and vividly the marvellous truths which the book was intended to convey. They were not given dignity or authority by being thus taken up into the book of divine revelation. As Clement and Origen at Alexandria accepted the teachings of Greek philosophy and its more abundant aspirations and showed the fullness and satisfaction of all in the gospel, thus bringing Plato to the feet of Christ, in a similar way the author of the Book of Job employed the vague, picturesque and often grotesque, but yet serious imaginings of unenlightened peoples to serve the higher and truer revelation of reality.

It must be remembered that the researches of scholars have greatly altered our conception of the ancient East. It is no longer regarded as a mass of humanity whose isolated portions were buried each in inert somnolence. The Book of Genesis ought to have taught us better than that. It was a very real and busy and living world which the up-rolling curtain of history revealed upon the stage of being. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and the other nations did not dwell apart; they influenced one another, having commercial relations, linked together by roads; each had a literature, and it may be much more than assumed with probability that they exchanged not only indigo and ivory but ideas and images.

We cannot help asking, therefore, as to the possible dependence of the Book of Job as a literary production upon earlier writings of other nations with which the author may be supposed to have been acquainted. Apart from questions of dependence indeed, it may be worth while at least to investigate the intellectual relationships which may exist between them. The difficulty is that little remains, comparatively speaking, of these ancient literatures, that resemblances and contrasts of thought and language would be likely to be few and forced. Yet, we cannot help asking whether there is not something in the literary works of Assyria or Egypt, at least, which throw light upon some of the thought problems centering in this poem of Job. Did others of those men of old feel the weight of the world-puzzle and leave their

querying and their salutions as material for the argument or for the solace of posterity? The libraries of ancient Assyria and Babylon do help us to answer this question and to find the same troubled human hearts outside the circle of Israel. In those Babylonian litanies, wonderful both in their resemblances and their divergencies when compared with the Hebrew writings, the worshiper asks,

“What have I done that I should bear the sin?”

To all Gods high and low has he prayed and uttered the incantation, yet still he suffers; even

“To the god whom I know not I have uttered the spell,
And yet I bear the sin.”

Another asks,

“Is there any who can learn the will of the gods in heaven?
The counsel of the divine lords of spirits, who can understand?

And again,

“A fetter has he laid upon me and no bracelet,
All day long like a tyrant he pursues me;
In the hour of night he lets me not breathe freely;
All my people have said that I am an evil doer.”

As though some poor sufferer goaded like Job by the pain of unmerited evils burst forth like him into reproaches of the Most High; for this is the very essence of the Book of Job, repeated again and again.

In the Egyptian “Book of the Dead” stands a well-known passage which may have been familiar to the writer of Job if he lived in Egypt and which certainly in its conception and form is not without resemblance to that famous thirty-first chapter. In this Egyptian burial ritual the soul is represented as coming to the bar of final judgment and there making its plea for acquittal before the gods. In this solemn hour the soul declares

“I know you, ye lords of truth and justice.
I have neither done any sin, nor omitted any duty to any man.
I have committed no uncleanness.
I have not spoken lightly.
I have done no shameful thing.
I have not blasphemed with my mouth.
I have not made men to hunger.
I have not made men to weep.
I have not falsified the weights of the balance.
.....

I have done no violence.
I have not put forth my arm to do wrong.
I have not oppressed the weak."

There are other and similar pleas made by the suppliant, some of which fall far below the moral and spiritual height of the Scripture, revealing here as so often the essential difference of standpoint in the midst of much apparent resemblance of form and matter. How remarkably similar, however, is the situation to that in which Job stands. He desires to appear before his judge; he demands the indictment of his adversary; he challenges him to show cause why this melancholy fate had fallen upon a righteous servant; he, too, would defend his integrity and is willing to invoke curses on his own head:

"If I have walked with vanity,
If I did despise the cause of my man-servant,
If I have withheld the poor from their desire,
Or have eaten my morsel alone,
If I have lifted up my hand against the fatherless."

Here for the present we may pause before passing to a more satisfying field of comparison. Yet it cannot but be recognized that in the fragments which have been quoted voices, as truly human, as really alive to the dignity and to the contradictions of human existence, break out of the dim past and are borne down to us with their "want and their infinite wail," as in the poem of Hebrew wisdom clamor and at last find peace in the clearer vision of the Eternal presence.